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SUBJECT: HAN MYUNG-SOOK NAMED PRIME MINISTER

REF: SEOUL 822

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLS PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Roh on March 24 nominated Han Myung-sook, a two-time former Cabinet minister and current Uri lawmaker, to be his new prime minister, subject to parliamentary confirmation. She would replace Lee Hae-chan, who stepped down earlier this month in the wake of a golf scandal (REFTEL). If confirmed, she would become Korea's first female prime minister. Known for her even-keeled leadership, Han is well-regarded by colleagues in both sides of the National Assembly and is expected to win confirmation.
END SUMMARY.

ROH NAMES HAN MYUNG-SOOK

¶2. (SBU) The Blue House announced March 24 that President Roh has nominated Han Myung-sook to replace Lee Hae-chan as prime minister. Lee Hae-chan resigned March 14 as a result of the "inappropriate golf" scandal (REFTEL). The nomination is subject to confirmation by the National Assembly. No date has been set yet for hearings.

¶3. (SBU) The ruling Uri Party and women's groups have lauded Han's nomination. Public opinion appears to be positive. Reaction from the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) has been muted. GNP Floor Leader Lee Jae-oh limited himself to pointing out that Han should resign from the Uri Party in order to show that she will be non-partisan in carrying out her duties as prime minister.

¶4. (SBU) If confirmed, Han would become Korea's first female prime minister. (NOTE: President Kim Dae-jung's attempt to name a woman in 2002 failed in the face of charges that the nominee, Chang Sang, had included misleading information in her resume and financial disclosure forms. END NOTE.) The Blue House has indicated that President Roh expects Han, like her predecessor, to assume responsibility for the day-to-day management of state affairs. However, although Roh is said to have been impressed with Han's even-keeled leadership as Minister of Environment, it is not apparent that the two have the same type of close political and personal relationship that Roh had with Lee Hae-chan.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Roh has handled this episode with unusual speed and tact. Not only did he accept Lee's resignation on the same day it was offered, he has nominated a successor whose character and qualifications have broad appeal. He has also gone out of his way to consult -- and heed -- the

counsel of his ruling party, and solicit the views of the opposition. By naming a non-controversial, well-respected woman, Roh has minimized the GNP's ability to draw blood during the confirmation hearing. Reaction to Han's nomination thus far suggests likely confirmation. END COMMENT.

BIO INFORMATION ON HAN MYUNG-SOOK

¶6. (SBU) Han Myung-sook is a second-term lawmaker and two-time Cabinet minister. She is widely respected for her pro-democracy credentials, integrity, and even-keeled leadership style. Her first term in the National Assembly, to which she was elected in 2000, was interrupted when President Kim Dae-jung named her his inaugural Minister for Gender Equality (2001-02). Subsequently, President Roh Moo-hyun named her Minister of Environment (2003-04). In April 2004, she returned to electoral office, winning her second term in the National Assembly on the proportional list of the Uri Party. From 2004-05, she served on the Steering Committee of the ruling party.

¶7. (SBU) Born in 1944 in Pyongyang, Han was active in the pro-democracy movement and was a pioneer in the fight for the rights of women and children in Korea. She has also identified North-South reunification as her other top area of interest. Both Han and her husband, theologian Park Seong-jun, were imprisoned during the Park Jung-hee era for their pro-democracy activities, she for two-and-a-half years (1979-1981) and he for thirteen (1968-1981). Han holds a Ph.D. in women's studies and B.A. in French literature from Ewha University. She also earned a master's degree in theology from Hanshin University. She and Park have one son.

VERSHBOW